

All Hanoi Had to Do Was Wait, Stream South, Fight One Battle

David Halberstam is a longtime observer of the war in Indochina. As a New York Times correspondent in Vietnam, he won a Pulitzer Prize for his 1963 coverage of South Vietnam.

By DAVID HALBERSTAM
Miami Herald-Newsday Wire

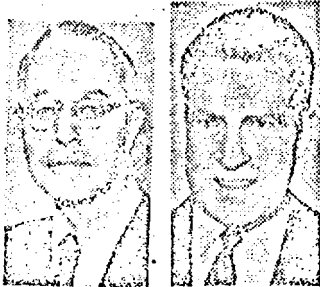
From the start there has always been a hole in the doughnut of Vietnamization. All Hanoi had to do was bide its time, build up its resources, wait until the American force level was minimal and then in 1972, an election year, come down the trails and fight one battle. One battle.

I cannot think of anyone knowledgeable about Vietnam who did not think something like this would happen and that when it did, President Nixon would be locked in. He was elected, after all, to end the war, not to mine anyone's harbors and not to play brinksmen with the Soviets.

Yet he was attached to an essentially bankrupt policy. He could not send back combat troops without ripping apart his own country. He could bomb, but bombing does not work, and it has a negative effect in America.

So bombing could not stem the tide. Nor could the Army of the Republic of (South) Vietnam. The ARVN, to be blunt, is a defeated army — in fact, a twice-defeated army, defeated when it fought alongside the French and defeated again, despite massive American aid, by the Viet Cong in 1960-64.

The ARVN has not changed. It is the feudal extension of a feudal society.



BUNKER

NIXON

its officers hold positions largely through nepotism and political intrigue. The similarity between it and China in 1946-49 is eerie. Can we be surprised that in a last desperate move after the battle of Quang Tri, President Thieu fires high-fanking officers?

But can Thieu fire Thieu? He is produced by the same corrupt system.

THE REALITY of ARVN has always been clear to Hanoi and most of the world, clear in fact to all but the American decision-makers, including most noticeably Ellsworth Bunker, that gentle, attractive, patrician New Englander who has so systematically sent back fallacious projections and estimates.

In 1967, about two months before the Tet offensive, I was in Saigon, and it was a time of remarkable American optimism, with Bunker one of the most optimistic of all. I had dinner at his house with a group of journalists, and he talked enthusiastically about the ARVN and his great dream — sending the ARVN into Laos. At that point I broke into laughter and the ambassador, puzzled, asked me why.

"Because if you send them into Laos, they'll get their asses kicked by him."

So a few years later they sent the ARVN into Laos, and they got their asses whipped, none of which had any effect upon Ellsworth Bunker's estimates and outlooks for the future, nor his importance and credibility as a witness in Washington.

IN 1969, Henry Kissinger, who is much admired in Washington for having the best sense of humor in the Nixon Administration (the competition is not too keen), met with a group of visiting Asians. They asked if the Nixon Administration was going to repeat the mistakes in Vietnam of the Johnson Administration.

"No," he answered, "we will not repeat their mistakes. We will not send 500,000 men." Pause. "We will make our own mistakes, and they will be completely our own." Appreciative laughter and much enjoyment of the moment.

Except that Kissinger's joke is no longer a laughing matter. To an extraordinary degree the Nixon Administration has repeated the mistakes and miscalculations of the Johnson Administration (prompting Russell Baker to describe it all as the reign of President Lyndon B. Nixon-ger).

The result is the most recent and desperate benchmark of escalation of great risk and dubious value, one repeatedly rejected by Johnson himself. The CIA even warned that such a move would have little effect.

A FEW DAYS before he took this step, Richard Nixon was reassuring the nation that Vietnamization was going well, and Kissinger, high-tailing it toward credibility, was telling Washington reporters that the in-

vasion was a desperate gamble, "one last throw of the dice" by Hanoi. Clearly, Nixon-Kissinger, like their predecessors, were wrong. They, too, were becoming impaled on Vietnam.

(Ten years ago, watching the latest in a stream of American officials arrive in Saigon just long enough to announce that victory was just around the corner, Neil Sheehan would nudge me and say: "Ah, another foolish westerner come to lose his reputation to Ho Chi Minh.") Nixon and Kissinger, too, had accepted a corrupted and corrupting reporting system.

But what went wrong and why?

In my judgment, the crucial mistakes have been:

• The insistence upon seeing South Vietnam as a real country with a real president and a real army; seeing the south as a genuine ally with a high degree of political legitimacy that deserves a great amount of American aid, and most important, thinking that the south was capable of performing the tasks demanded of it by American strategy and rhetoric.

South Vietnam, George Ball wrote in 1965, is an army without a country. Nothing has changed since then. Yet under Nixon there has been no tempering of American aims and rhetoric to reality, that is, to the self-evident limits of the American ability to effect its will in South Vietnam, and the capacity of the South Vietnamese to withstand the thrusts of their better-motivated countrymen.

Actually the tipoff on the Nixon policies came before he took office. In the last few months of the Johnson presidency, Averell Harriman, trying to

OMAHA, NEBR.
WORLD HERALD

M - 125,376
S - 273,394

MAY 14 1972

Faulty Intelligence

When the North Vietnamese invasion came six weeks ago, why didn't the United States know where it was coming and what size it was likely to be?

How could the enemy prepare an offensive involving the arming and positioning of hundreds of thousands of men with American intelligence knowing so little of what was about to happen?

For months we had been told that the enemy was preparing an offensive. It was reasonable to assume that both Washington and Saigon had some idea where he would hit and in what fashion.

But our military men and our South Vietnamese ally were surprised. The Soviet-built tanks came scudding across the Demilitarized Zone and smashed South Vietnamese positions. Some of the South Vietnamese obviously did not fight well and some did not fight at all. The failures cannot be excused, and the forebodings of disaster for the South Vietnamese cause may become the reality unless the South Vietnamese fight better.

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But the United States also had a responsibility and that responsibility included assessment of intelligence as well as providing air support for the South Vietnamese.

United States News and World Report magazine reported that American officials were presented by opposing analyses of the pre-invasion buildup. The Central Intelligence Agency thought the enemy would not invade across the Demilitarized Zone. The Defense Intelligence Agency predicted that the neutral zone would be the invasion route and said that the United States should prepare for the worst.

The New York Times Service had a different report. It said that the National Security Council's Intelligence Committee, headed by Henry Kissinger, thought the thrust would come from West to East against Kontum in the Central Highlands.

The Times quoted other intelligence analysts as saying there had been no intelligence failure, that the policy makers had been fully informed about the enemy capability "though we couldn't tell just when or where he would strike."

We find it hard to believe that intelligence did its job adequately when our side was caught so completely by surprise.

Columnist Bill Buckley and others have talked darkly of sacking American generals for having been too optimistic and for having made too many mistakes and miscalculations on the basis of information that proved erroneous.

But this isn't the American Civil War, when Lincoln sifted his generals until he found Grant. The denigration of the military in this country has gone much too far, in our opinion, and the advice to rough up the generals for the errors of the Vietnam War adds to the emotional heat without pointing the way to end the war.

This is not the time to be finding scapegoats. Not when the President is trying to withdraw American forces under honorable conditions and has risked a confrontation with Soviet Russia and Red China in order to accomplish that end.

But America's intelligence must do better in other parts of the world — the Mideast, Latin-America — if we are to escape the sorry consequences of wrong guesses about our Communist adversaries and their capabilities. When the stakes are so high, our country cannot afford to miscalculate.